Metamorphosis

-

the sense for truth

“ … with the daunting profusion of … forms, the way to uncover the simplicity of the ‘secret law’ is to ‘gaze on them as they grow’.”

Gordon L. Miller (quoting Goethe)

**1**

Long, long ago, I engaged with outlying communities in the arid and dusty back-country, the semi-desert lands far north of Cape Town. I was a community worker, supported by non-governmental organisations, seeking to relieve the burdens of poverty, injustice and ecological predation. Already then, I wondered at the interventions – the funded projects and organisations and the specious evaluations that accompanied them – with which I was caught up. I lived with an unsettled intuition that, while I was supposedly doing something right for embittered communities rejected by the twin evils of apartheid and urban chic, actually I was doing something wrong. The grounded warmth of my relationships with community members was disturbed, rather than enhanced, by the instrumental earnestness of strategies calculated to change the situations I was meeting. Deep inside my own earth, incipient, tiny as a seed, my doubt grew along with my certainty – there must be another way.

Gradually, I learned of that other way, a way of respect for life’s processes, a working alongside, a sensibility for human nobility. And, alongside others, I formed a community development resource association, CDRA. Through practising differently, we learned more. We moved away from calculative approaches that produce an increasingly materialist world, allowing separation, inequality and control to erode the very human balance between destiny and chance. I learned about the sacred calling that lies within every human being’s gaze, clouded and confused though it may be so much of the time. We learned that oppression takes many forms, and that excessive convenience inconveniences in the end. I learned that organisms, unlike artefacts, create themselves out of themselves, and that life’s unceasing movement is what generates life’s unceasing movement, and that every categorisation and structural adjustment and external solution carries the seeds of its own demise. We learned the inner nature of social change.

We studied, we observed, we wrote, we challenged, we defied. We reflected. We shook ourselves as free as we could from the norms of what had become the development industry, based as it was on economic determinism and political materialism. We were blessed and resourced by people searching for integrity amidst the ruins of spurious intentions. We argued for recognition of the relationships between light and shadow, between process and product, between invisible and visible, between imminent (immanent) and manifest, between attitude and action, inner and outer, between freedom and constraint. Between love and scepticism. Gradually, we reached out beyond the local, and our community became global.

I loved those years with ‘a love that doesn’t bend’ (Bob Dylan). My understanding grew, my relationships expanded, my vision became clearer, the play between intent and actuality more and more curious. Years passed. Gradually I tired, at first imperceptibly, of the effort required to hold a growing organisation still flexible and fluid. Ideas and departures started to become norms and patterns, then standards, then rules and even structures. Repetition and replication began to encroach on observation and insight. Financial resourcing fomented a subtle erosion of integrity. Nuances of relationship were usurped with regimes and regulations.

By the time I left, after 15 years, I could persuade myself that the experience had soured. I felt beset on all sides. The tips of my fingers, like the tips of CDRA’s tentacles, felt flattened. Mountains had been reduced to molehills. Colleagues had become colleagues, replacing the friends they once were. Ardent disagreements had been reduced to differences.

I left because everything that surrounded me had become wrong. I did not leave angry, but I left sore; I left bereft. It has taken these intervening years, and this current time, to work through that monotonous sense of bereavement as betrayal.

**2**

I write as morning sun slants through darkened leaves across my keyboard.

A mountain breathes beneath my feet.

The silence is soft as skin.

I live here now, in this place that touches the sky.

It has taken me a long time to arrive; now I am here.

Sue and I, pursuing our paths of practice across land and ocean and cultures, meet, and are wooed by, a wild mountain range. The relationship becomes a life work. Eventually, recently, we come here to live. Though still we travelled, and straddled. But then begins the time of coronavirus, Covid-19, and lockdown.

A world in travail. Entire cities and nations shut down amidst a ratcheting roar of opinion and disagreement, a world war between falsehood and truth. People dying, leaders lying. I feel, palpably, that our future is being stolen from us, and with it the sacristy of our past – and, without past or future, the present, all we have left, feels attenuated, thin, paltry, pointless, as though it struggles to draw breath, as though it has lost its wider context, and is wasting away.

Here though, on the mountain, the wild curls itself around me in a protecting embrace.

Here eternity still stretches infinitely, between the awakening bird calls of morning and the chorus frogs of evening, between root and leaf and flower and insect and bird and bee, between sun and moon, wind and cloud, between reaching summit and resting valley, between north and south and east and west, between late summer turning to autumn to the inwardness of winter into the opening gestures of spring.

Here, the very first *homo sapiens* once lived, we live now amidst their memories and the heft of their tools; here, it feels as though human consciousness is still unfurling.

I am grounded, I am ‘in place’ – and my hankering for travel, for the next horizon, ceases, as each step I take, each path I walk, each *koppie* I summit, every plant I see, every bird that alights or glides or nests, every sleek beetle that flies erratic and drunken through oceans of air, every scent, every tango between light and dark, all are meetings that carry their own horizons deep within and also on the surfaces of their skin.

Here I discover that the grain in the stillness of holy place is movement.

I am stilled enough to notice the path of the sun swing from its mid-winter venture north to its homing journey south, across our shadowed mountains, eventually lighting them with its relentless summer gaze that, at its southernmost point, can brittle colour itself.

I am stilled enough to notice the difference in the redness of the moon when I catch it, a newly grown sliver, setting already in early evening over the western hills - compared with when, on the other side of the month, I catch it, wizened as a dried heel of discarded rind, still rising over the eastern flanks of the mountains when I go outside in the early hours of the morning.

As late summer turns through autumn I watch the sturdy aloes sending a couple thin stems up and out above their spiky fat succulent leaves, and these impossibly elongated stems – impossible for such squat and earthen plants – forming tiny green nodules at their tips, arranged in interlocking spirals, which gradually swell and then burst into the most delicate and flamboyant crowning of fragile bell-petaled flowers, rampant yellow or flame-throwing red. Then, as autumn ends, I discover the tiny fruits, like small caper berries, that now cluster about the tips of the stems replacing the flowers that once were. Now, as I write, in full spring, there is no trace anymore of any of this, even the long stems have disappeared, and the stalwart slowness of the leaves regain the measure of their pace.

In late summer the leaves of the stinkwood tree are curling and blackening at their edges, and by late winter the tree is bare, a delicate latticework of interlacing branches, when in early spring, suddenly one morning a thousand pinpricks of green can be detected almost at the very moment that they exude, through the stinkwood’s bark, a thousand green eyes opening out onto their cosmos, the tree in communion with every tiniest opening in the world around it.

(I think back to late summer, when all the termite mounds in this area open tiny holes in their rough and arched domes through which many thousand winged termites, male and female, are pushed to fly up and form with their brothers and sisters the white swarming clouds that have become known as the wedding dance of the termites, performed on the eve of the first winter rains so that the ground will be soft enough for new mounds to be born through the mating. How do the termites know, with earthen accuracy, when the rains are about to fall? We watch as the termites squeeze through the pinprick holes, then find their wings and with them, their purpose, and leave the surface of the mound for their journey into dangerously exposed space.)

I discover no end. I am living within a wild world that throngs with beings, each interwoven with each, all forming one skein, continuously creating itself out of itself.

I feel my eyes opening. And then I see. In all the wild, there is One which is the wildest of them all, and the most humble, the most cloistered, the most important, the most unseen, the most endemic and the most diffuse. Wilder than the elements. Inside everything, between every thing, back-grounded by every thing but moving into the foreground as I observe more closely, the being that is time reveals itself.

As I look, as I see, it is as though time reveals itself as the hearth being of the wild, threading itself through every nook and cranny and gap and fissure and space and place and creature and element, weaving all these into a tapestry of wild. Weaving them into itself – and growing itself out of them.

It is time that creates itself out of itself. It is time that infuses the wild with its presence. Here, time lives; the wild depends on it. On the mountain, time lives - it has not disappeared, it has not fractured and fragmented and dissipated and atrophied.

Here, time is not merely present - time is master.

**3**

In the depths of time lies a stillness that allows movement to be discerned – stilling us enough to be moved.

Up on the hillside on the edge of wilderness, there is a king protea bush.  The king protea is breathtaking at any moment. Its flowers are huge, they can be twice the size of your two hands held spread alongside each other, palms cupped.

On this particular bush, which we planted 15 years ago, there are at the moment seven gathering buds, still closed, and three very new buds, much younger.

Proteas tend to hold onto their dead flowers for years; on this bush are many ancient, scraggy remnants of flowers still largely intact and slowly disintegrating. That’s a lot of powerful nobility on a small bush.

The buds have been gathering themselves for many months now, unopened, velvet to the touch, commanding in their presence, all seemingly very aware of us when we visit them, which is increasingly often, at the moment almost daily.

They start tiny, lengthening into the circular space that has been created by a crop of tough leathery leaves – a protective chalice, a clearing in a forest. They expand themselves roundwards into a sphere, they get bigger and more spherical, slowly they gain their velvety softness, their lustrous colouring. Later, when they are large enough to burst, they start elongating, lengthening again, their roundness maintained below while they push further and further out towards the sky (I wrote ‘push’, perhaps I mean ’pulled’). When they have achieved their utmost stretching length, they start to fill out at the tip, so that a kind of ‘waist’ forms between the roundness at the bottom and the strengthening, ever more sturdy widening at the top, then gradually the waist fills in, until you have the entirely mature bud, sturdy, strong, uniformly grand, perfectly proportioned, ready to open.

I have been visiting regularly, and the day I’m writing, now, turns out to be the last day that the first of this batch of buds to open, is still closed; the very next day I can already see down into its inner vault through the tiniest of gaps at the top.

This evening, the evening before, the world is imbued with pastel. All these weeks and months I have been observing, how the form ‘arises', how the form fills out (or in), how the form *forms –* this perfectly precise living sculpture that is being shaped with such fluidity, sensibility, seemingly from the inside.

I can feel the warmth, the ripening momentum, the fierce *torque* of the flower. Unrestrained yet held in the stream of time, in silence, an act of sublime concentration. There is exultation in the stillness, as though it hallows its space. I feel the power living inside that growing bud, a ceaseless movement that continues for so many months, like a breath infinitely expelled.

Its as though the entire bud is the sculptor’s eye, I understand how it shapes as it does, round then elongated then round again, stretching and widening, widening and stretching in turn. The vision that molds the growing bud into the shape of sculpting hands.  The warmth gestating, as though a swarm of bees were humming inside the bud, exuding wax for the comb of their home. As though a mighty storm were building. The tension is palpable. Now, night is falling around me, I head down the hill, sleep, dream, wake, return. The land has turned to morning, the protea bud has realised its fullness, and is opened.

Goethe’s voice, coming through the centuries, speaks into my mind. “There is no outer, there is no inner; hold this close”, he says, “this holy open secret”.

What is it that is happening through that pullulating, burgeoning warmth inside the bud, warmth that you could take a temperature from? Is there a pushing outwards, from within, the forming flower a fierce insistence as it expands? So it seems when the bud is rounding. But when the bud is elongating, it feels as though it is being drawn from far without, drawn out of itself, eliciting a surrender, a lifting of itself into a form, a shaping, that comes from some celestial place high above the earth, under the watch of a cool, collected gaze. That feel of pushing outward, as though the earth itself were starting the creation of a mountain from the roots up, and that feel of a buoyant rising, as though the sun were orchestrating rhythm and melody. The dark rising, the light falling; I feel myself turning and turning about like a firecracker spinning slowly in a long languorous arc through the sky. I am pulled apart by the poles within the intensity of the bud, the pushing, the lightening within the flower – there are two streams, yes, always working together, fierce and gentle, each inside the other, each impotent without the other, each overwhelmingly itself.

But the protea is not being pulled apart at all, it is flowering, and as it flowers, the form is changing, the bud disappearing, its taut ferocity giving way to the spread-eagled opening of the bloom, abandoning itself to the opened sky, to insects and rain and a tumbling decay.

**4**

Nothing is the same though.

We are shaken to our core, all of us, each of us who may read this, and all who will not.

Here on the mountain, we too live in lockdown. And if we cannot pursue our social practice because we cannot travel, because we cannot meet others in person, because our orders insist that we must distance ourselves socially, then we pursue our social practice in other ways. Through Zoom. Through the internet. The world wide web. Here on the mountain, I watch as spiders catch insects in the intricacies of webs that glitter in early morning dew-light. Are we so caught?

Nothing may be taken for granted anymore. We cannot be sure whether we are insect or hawk.

Over the years my practice, my social practice which has accompanied me all the days of my life, has evolved to a pinnacle question – can a social practice that foregrounds observation only, rather than intervention, play a healing role in the world? Here on the mountain, through the ministrations of the internet, and Zoom, Sue and I are still able to pursue this question, by being taken off the mountain and out there (where?) into meetings with fellow practitioners all across the globe, working on the art of observation, more necessary than ever in these benighted times. The coherence of our days, even the reign of time as master, is jeopardised, by Zoom; yet it is on Zoom, for gods’ sake, amidst the soul-destroying, insanely-reductive, shard-like, fingernail-cutting remnants of human nobility, that our practice continues, more humble, more hubristic than ever.

In one group of practitioners that we work with – a group that, two years before, gathered on this mountain from many corners of the world in celebration and reflection – we have come together every second week on Zoom, for conversation and succour and solidarity, ever since our world turned upside down, about eight months ago now. We have penetrating, insightful, generative conversations; Zoom, we discover, is also able to deliver a level of engagement that permits entry to incredible flights of meaning. Following our practice, and recognising that, at the moment, attempts to find coherent arguments to explain the times that we are living almost always brings virulent disagreement amongst friends and colleagues, we practise the gesture of deep curiosity and rapt attentiveness, by asking each person to reflect upon what they have been observing about themselves and the world around them, in these changing times. In each meeting we bring our observations to bear on our own experience of what we have been meeting in ourselves and others – we do not argue or try to prove one point above another, we do not look for explanation, we only attempt to portray that which we have observed.

To assist this, at each meeting we ask people to reflect through a new question that might act as a searchlight to illuminate the darkness; we shine the question on our observations, so as to see them more clearly. (Though Zoom fragments and distracts and narrows through its rituals of compliance and separation, we hope that it can, to an extent, be gentled and softened through the same human faculty that accompanies the faculty of observation – the profound simplicity of presence.)

In one such conversation, we ask the questions: What have you lost, during this world-changing time, and what have you found? (There is a corollary to this question, which emerges as we bear witness to our responses – what kind of a world is being built?)

The responses at first astound, then settle into a revelation – these times are characterised by polarity. For many people, while they would never consciously have chosen the circumstances under which we now are living (or were living during that conversation), nevertheless we may have been almost unconsciously yearning for these very circumstances. For many of us knew that our lives were, already before this ‘civilizational crisis’, out of order, out of control, too rushed, too disproportional, too consuming, glaringly contradictory, uncomfortably convenient, hopelessly fragmented, wilfully ignorant, outrageously trivial. Either earnestly sentimental or predatory in their efforts to get ahead, or simply to keep head above water. We were already building a world that could not be sustained without our willing compliance in compromising much that we claimed to hold dear. This civilizational strait is revealing fault lines that already existed, and that we have participated in creating*.* In many cases, the curtailment of so many ‘freedoms’ has brought us, kicking and screaming perhaps, to the edge (actually the centre) of ourselves once more. Are we victims, or are we perpetrators? Have we lost, or have we found? Someone notes – what is essential has been given more space. Someone else observes that they have found again the quality of time that they had made resolutions about finding again even whilst knowing that their resolutions were hopeless; yet suddenly, against their will, they had achieved their will.

What is it, to have choice taken away from us, only to find that some profounder choices may have been met? And that they would not have been met through our own will. Is our own will perhaps outside of us, working through our circumstances? In what sense, then, is it ours? Our relationship to the world teeters on a knife-edge of meaning.

The harshness of our current circumstances reveals a world that is us – even as we wish for it to be other.

**5**

One thing turns into its opposite, revealing another aspect of that same thing, an aspect that has never been seen before. Each moment is new, revealing all that has gone before, indicating all that is coming. Nothing is arbitrary.

What kind of a world is being built?

It was Goethe who took the first intimations contained in my early practice, and matured them into a way of seeing. Though he was born 200 years before me, it was under his tutelage, mediated by contemporaries, that the world began to reveal itself. He taught me the crux of his art of observation – do not observe in order to effect anything, but only to understand (a ‘demanding’ approach only obscures). He taught me that life is a shaping, a sculptor, a shaper, a sculpture – that if we wish to understand life we must pay attention to the forms that life creates; the pulse of life will be detected through the form. Life lies concealed within the form; life will reveal itself through loving observation of the form. Pay attention, he said, to the ‘coming-into-being’ of the form, pay attention to the organism, the particular manifestation of life that you are interested in; for me, this has extended itself from natural organism to social situation *as* organism. View it over time, as one moment changes into the next, seed through leaf, leaf to leaf, leaf to flower, flower to seed. Pay attention to the movement *between* the forms (and when you do this, rhythmically, over time, you begin to realise the symbiotic relationship between your imagination and your observation – that the more you practice the one with rigour, the other reveals itself more fully, and the organism discloses itself through both). Pay attention to each part, look for similarities and differences, the organism is always present in each part. Observe the organism always within its context, become aware of its relationship to its context, where it can be differentiated, where not. As you contemplate your observations, reflection will allow you to observe the expanding and contracting of your own being, and you may understand how life enhances itself. And you may understand, too, that life enhances itself through death – that this polarity enables the movement *between* the forms, to which we are asked to pay such close attention.

Years of working with people, and our manifold relationships with self and other and context, open my eyes to a quality of human *being* (recognising that a quality is always, following Steve Talbot, “the expressive shape of some inner gesture, a gesture of consciousness”). I see both nobility and savagery. I see inner and outer. Generosity and greed. The individual enclosed in a skin that both separates and connects. The fragility of power and the power of fragility. I see polarity, and the movement *between.* I see, and I experience, the enhancement of consciousness through the oscillation between poles, how one pole grows, expands, strengthens, starts to dominate, until stasis, cessation of movement, may occur, and life cries out for a turning, a turning through which the other pole starts to arise, a balance is restored, learning has taken place, individual and collective consciousness has lengthened itself.

The meaning of a phrase like ‘the fragility of power and the power of fragility’ has this movement between so-called ‘opposites’ built into it. Each pole contains the other, each pole grows through the other; the extreme of one pole will be the shadow of the other. The quality of human *being*, its gesture of consciousness, lies precisely in the freedom to choose the balance *between*, at every moment afresh. To embrace both the strengthening *and* the turning, to shun neither. Freedom demands self-observation, to attend, at every moment, to where one is in that space between poles – and to respond. Mastery of such freedom treads the thin line between nobility and savagery.

We must become aware of a social situation, become aware of its gesture, through its activity of coming-into-being, through considering every part. What kind of a world is being built?

The word ‘lockdown’ was used, prior to these times, for a prison protocol – further isolation of an already imprisoned person – how is it that this is the word that emerged simultaneously across the earth – were we already imprisoned? The phrase ‘social distancing’ arose, as a description of what in fact is the physical distancing that the coronavirus supposedly demanded – and it has already resulted in a more socially distanced ‘society’. An instrument carrying the appearance of a gun is pointed at the head in order to take temperatures. The pejoratively-used concept of ‘conspiracy theory’ becomes ubiquitous as a way of denying the validity of a whole area of thought with respect to societal reality, and it becomes clear that there are right and wrong ways of thinking and talking and writing, and that those ways deemed, by a ‘mainstream’, to be wrong, are penalised to the point of policing. The spread of a lifestyle spent tucked away from physical contact with others, demanding an ever-increasing time spent suspended, like puppets, from the strings of digital technologies, arises simultaneously with the rise in the financial fortunes of these technologies. The more a social sensibility splinters, the more it splinters; the more we are separated, the more we are separated. Whole swathes of people are impoverished, whole swathes of people become redundant, discarded (even as we are ostensibly doing all we can to save lives). Is it an arbitrary coincidence, or is it coincident with the rise of this a-social world that the phrase ‘essential and non-essential services’ also becomes so widespread in the discourse? Is it an arbitrary coincidence, or is it coincident with the rise of this newly fractured world that so many people start to feel themselves to be ‘non-essential’? What kind of a world is building itself here, when there is so much confusion, so many lies being spread, on all sides of every argument and position, that one can no longer tell truth from lie, despite all of us being rendered transparent and exposed by the spread of a technology that has us trapped in its twin powers of surveillance and necessity. Every way we turn, the very idea of quality is outlawed, and only quantity counts. We befoul the earth, our own home, we create squalor and obscene wealth; we turn from spirit and sink deeper into the inertness of matter.

None of this is hidden, yet untruth overwhelms us; we struggle to see. The world is darkening before our gaze. When truth cannot be distinguished from lie, then it is truth that fades; we have entered the rampant age of untruth – and nothing can be trusted. So the world darkens further.

At the beginning of the first world war, early last century, the British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey remarked to a friend: "The lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our life-time". The world was darkening irretrievably. At that time, Rudolf Steiner, Goethe’s incandescent interpreter, was asked: ‘What can I do in this crisis?’ And he responded: ‘Endeavor to understand. See through things; nothing else is of any use.’

Too few people saw through things, and in reflecting about the second world war, which developed so irrevocably out of the first, the critic George Steiner (no relation) spoke of an absence of hope – quoting Franz Kafka – and said that, given the demise and distortion of any rooted sense for morality and tradition, we had been left with “the promise of an eerie freedom”. It seems we have persisted through an age of such eerie freedom, and find ourselves again now, in the midst of a new war.

For war has become part of our daily reality. There can be little doubt that we are at war – the doubt and disagreement we feel on being confronted with this sentence are the weapons that have been turned against us. We are at war - against the coronavirus, against the earth, against ourselves, against life. Against community. We are goaded to war. The verb ‘weaponise’ has invaded our lexicon; the world darkens further. We have to try to see through things.

Light and darkness are polarities. As with any polarity, they belong to each other, they define each other, they provide the ground for the growth of the other. A socially active practice of observation *as* intervention may shine light into the darkness. So that we may see. So that we may see ourselves. So that we may, not eradicate the darkness - this being a contradiction in terms for it eradicates light as well and creates more darkness - but infuse darkness with light. To enter the darkness with our light, the lamp of self-observation. Recognising, then, that our very light is also in need of tempering, by darkness. Neither lamentation nor spurious hope will do. Resilience, though, is a form of moral imagination - to straddle the turning. The road stretches ahead, without imaginable end.

**6**

Many years ago, I thought that my circumstances had betrayed me, I thought I was forced to move away from something, to leave it behind; but in fact I was choosing to move on, and toward something, something that was already inside of me. I pursued that which was pursuing me. I have journeyed through worlds, in pursuit, pursued – I have loved these years with ‘a love that doesn’t bend’.

Now, right now, I exercise my practice, my social practice, online, through Zoom. In this time of the lie, I must work on my ability to see, on my sense for truth, on all our sense for truth, online, through Zoom. Whilst knowing that Zoom, a servant of the digital empire, obscures, distorts, and practices the lie – so that our networking may further entrap us into its macabre machinations.

Every moment, now, is a choice, a gauging, a weighing. The odds are against us, the dice seem loaded, the horizon and the road ahead is smudged and obscured as though with a giant eraser; no, that simile is out of date, its almost as though there were a finger poised over the delete key.

Yet, I have no choice really – and this is not due to Zoom or the war that it and its kind foments – it is my own choosing that tells me I have no choice, the pursuer that I am in pursuit of. Every moment is a turning. I obey a law that does not demand compliance, that, on the contrary, seeds my freedom – the ‘secret law’ that Goethe revealed. We all obey this law, unconsciously; would that we could help it to consciousness, that it might help us to see, to understand – “ … nothing else is of any use”.

There are two things I know. I carry them with me, unhidden, unafraid – they are full of their own intrinsic power.

The first is that the human being has a sense for truth – the way we have a sense of smell. Goethe said that “every object, well contemplated, creates an organ for its perception”. This as my practice.

The second is that time is not passive, but an active being working tirelessly to enable, to allow, to incubate the intimate shaping of life. Time is the organism’s medium; life is a time-being. The digital empire consumes time, voraciously; it sucks the time out of life. If we will master the years ahead of us, and emerge as free human beings, we must make time our master, our teacher, our charge. To cherish, adore and protect the refuges of time in the very midst of ongoing predation – this as my prayer.

Towerland

27th September 2020